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THE TRAGEDY OF GOLF

BY P. A. VAILLE

GOLF is a great game: a game worthy to be played and loved, as it is by our greatest; but it bids fair to become a national obsession. It sounds slightly axiomatic, but I think we may say that all obsessions are obnoxious. Certainly there are clear indications that the obsession of golf will be obnoxious, if not, indeed, absolutely dangerous.

Coming from me, who have done my best to spread the higher knowledge of golf, this may sound inconsistent. I must be content to let my motive and my reasons for making such a statement appear as I go on with my argument.

Golf with many people in England is almost synonymous with life. They live on the links, and when occasionally off them they talk golf and think golf—and nothing but golf. Their life is dominated by the game. We have, coming after them, another class—a much more numerous class—who are not so fanatically bound to the game, but whose spare time is practically entirely devoted to talking or playing golf. These people are already under the obsession, and they are very painful persons to meet, especially if one be not a golfer.

So long as one can talk golf balls—pimply, dimply, or smooth—spoons, niblicks, stymies, pulls, slices, divots, and all the usual jargon, about which in reality these people know very little, it is possible to hold their interest; but if by any chance one should slip out of this somewhat restricted field into the broader issues of national or imperial politics, for instance, one must be prepared for the vacant eye that tells of a vacant mind chained to a little pimply globe of congo-discord, that dances always before all that there is of mental outlook behind the eye; and this, although not the whole tragedy of golf, is by no means an inconsiderable portion of it.

Golf at best is a game—a great game, I grant. Had I not thought so I should not have done what I have for it. I have worked for the game. It was a labor of love, and as usual in such circumstances I have been repaid many times. How many golfers do we find who want to do anything for the game? That is one of the truest tests of any one's love for anything or any one. Tried by this standard, how many golfers love golf?

As a matter of simple fact there is but one idea dominating the mind of the average golfer, and that is *to get all he can out of golf*. This may sound brutally candid, but, unfortunately, it is true; and it is necessary occasionally to speak the truth and to speak it plainly. There never was a time in the history of England, or golf, when plain speaking was more necessary than it is now. There is far too much selfishness about it, far too much craving for pleasure and the ease and enjoyment of life without any corresponding idea of rendering any service to any one or anything in return for these benefits—if indeed they are benefits.

So it is with the golfer and his game. He is “all out” for what he can get out of golf. He does not in ninety-five cases of a hundred even try to know it. He plays it in an uninspired mechanical way, for he knows nothing of the soul of golf—he is merely raveling the husk, and playing that which is the most mechanical of games, when it is not understood in sympathy and love, in a soulless manner. Truly, in great measure, is he more an object for pity than for blame; for in many other sports we see nearly as bad a condition, yet in golf there are elements that go more deeply to the root of things than do those in the other sports.

Golf is affected by quite a number of different classes. Firstly, there are those who love it and play it for itself—and know it. Secondly, there are those who like it and play it—without knowing it. Thirdly, there are those who hate it and pretend to play it—because everybody who is anybody does play. Fourthly, there are those, and they are an increasingly large class, who take it like their church, because they have got to know that “it's good for business.” Fifthly, there are those who find it a fine excuse for bridge, billiards, and—something else that starts with a b.

The result of all this is that golf clubs are springing up throughout the country, and the game is undoubtedly taking a wonderful hold, not only on England, but on the world;

and the tragedy of it is twofold. Thousands of the alleged golfers are spurious followers of a noble game, and tens of thousands of both the spurious and genuine followers think more of golf than they do of their own country.

It is hardly too much to say that at this time there are many thousands of golfers in England who go perilously near to deserving the word traitor. I know it is almost a shocking statement to make. Nothing can excuse it but truth. Can it be denied that to-day England needs all the help of all her men to bind her and her Empire together, to maintain her in the position that she has so long held among nations? Can the man who needlessly gives more time to any game than he gives to his country *when she needs him* be considered a loyal man and a worthy son of a great race; in a word, or a few, is he worthy of the great name of Englishman?

I do not know what is thought of it here, but, frankly, in my opinion he is not.

This is another part of the great tragedy of golf. Day after day men who might be of vital service to England in this time of real crisis are engaged in whiling away their time in play. It is not, with all of them, selfishness and want of patriotism. Many of them are retired officers and Anglo-Indians whose knowledge, used in a practical way, might be of infinite value to the Empire, but who at present are in many cases absolutely wasted. There is no provision made for such as these to assist the State with their knowledge and experience. Of course, it may be said that a good man will win his way through and make himself heard. It may be so; but the system of Parliamentary representation in England, with its expensive and microscopic constituencies, tends to keep the best men out of the House.

There is such a sinful waste of time and material amongst the golfers of the United Kingdom that some one should try to do something to remove the reproach. Taken as a whole, the real golfers are recruited from the finest class in the world, and, in many cases, they are both traveled and cultured men. What is to prevent them from forming a Golfers' Imperial League, and doing yeoman service for the Empire by placing at the disposal of the nation the wisdom and experience gained by wide travel and varied service in every corner of the Empire—of the world?

I have the greatest respect for the training a man gets in sport. There is scarcely a better way in which to acquire

a knowledge of men and how to deal with them, and the idea mentioned by me just now is capable of indefinite expansion.

Apart from the almost sinful waste of time—much of which is due to England—for which golf is responsible, the most objectionable feature of its recent development is the social and business side of it. Multitudes of people now belong to golf clubs just because it is “the thing” to do it. These persons, as may readily be imagined, are simply a pest to the real golfer, when they go on to the links. Fortunately many of them never stir a divot. These and the businesslike person who seeks to extend his connection are what I call spurious golfers. They certainly are not much good to the game; I doubt that the game is much good to them, and I think it problematical that they are much good to the nation.

Hitherto I have been dealing with the general aspect of the tragedy of golf. There is about golf particularly one feature that always seems to me almost sad. It is played by quite the best classes of the community, by our leading statesmen, barristers, and engineers, by our universities and public schools. It has been written up and down, and in and out, by practised players with big university distinction, and after all these years, after all this travail, much of the real beauty of golf has been missed for want of a genuine and sympathetic insight into the mysteries of the game, if, indeed, they may be called mysteries, which really are abundantly plain to one who loves the game enough to seek an understanding of them.

These mysteries—and I call them so only because so far they have escaped the attention of those who have essayed to instruct their fellow-golfers—go right to the root of the game, and are such that no golfer who really wants to know the game in and out may be without them, yet so blind to the truest beauty of their great game have golfers been for scores and scores of years that they have suffered the falsest of doctrine and have assisted in spreading it, and so they are doing now, in golf and in that greater and more important game—the Imperial game.

Now it is easy to make vague general statements like this, so I must give a few specific instances of what I mean. I hold strongly that merely destructive criticism is of little use. Unless a man can show the better way he had better hold his peace.

With most golfers a good drive is a thing to be desired almost above pearls and rubies, and nearly every book and most instructors try to prevent him getting it. It is not a gigantic conspiracy. It is merely the national habit of borrowing somebody else's thoughts to save the trouble of using one's own brains. So, in the all-important matter of the distribution of weight in the swing, the unfortunate golfer is taught that at the top of his swing his weight should be on his right foot and leg, whereas in very truth it should, if anything, be on the left, or, at most, equally distributed between the two. That which is frequently mistaken for weight on the right is merely the torsional or twisting strain put on it as it turns in the swing. This is most simply proved to be true by fixing from a wall a rigid projecting rod which makes contact with one's neck on the side farther from the hole. It will be found then that without contortion it is impossible in driving to put the weight on to the right foot. The rod is placed against the neck, for even the novice at golf knows that he must not move his head, for if he does he is swaying, which is a grievous fault. The rod prevents his swaying, and incidentally shows him, which few golfers know even now, that the weight is *never* on the *right leg* in a true and rhythmical golf swing. When a golfer has this knowledge he has one of the greatest secrets of that most complicated of all strokes, the golf swing.

So for centuries have golfers who should have known better been worshipping the fetish of the left. In other words, they have preached in season and out of season, mostly out, and in books and out of them, that the left hand and arm is the dominant partner in the golfing drive and that the right is the assistant. This in many cases is done by implication, but there are not wanting instances where learned writers with many university degrees and qualifications and the highest practical success in the game behind them have stated clearly and explicitly that this is so; whereas in truth such doctrine is sheer futility, and is merely calculated to ruin a man's play if he be strong enough and foolish enough to follow it. Fortunately Nature is nearly always sufficiently strong to overcome this faulty teaching, but the mere preaching of it is a sin, and, moreover, is a genuine hindrance to many an aspiring player. It will not, therefore, be out of place to give a few moments' consideration to this matter.

In the first place, there is no other two-handed stroke in the whole realm of athletics, from wood-chopping to baseball, wherein the same claim is made. The right hand is everywhere allowed to be superior to the left, as, indeed, is natural. Only in golf has this strange claim been made and tolerated for a time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary. No reason has ever been advanced for this strange assertion, and apparently none has been demanded. It did not even strike its supporters as strange that left-handed people, who had been endowed by kindly Nature with the most important hand and arm in the proper place for golf, immediately forsook their natural advantage, got special clubs built for themselves, and proceeded to play the game as the right-handed did—that is, with the master hand in command. With all the writing that there has been about the power of the left, there has never been a suspicion of an explanation of its alleged power. I believe that I am giving it now for the first time. If not, I am open to correction. It is manifest to any one with the most rudimentary knowledge of anatomy and athletics that at the moment of impact there is very little power in the left. The mere position is a confession of want of power.

In all two-handed strokes, indeed in nearly all strokes, the greatest power is got when the strain of the blow falls across the wrist joint—that is, *not* the way in which it bends. This is what happens in wood-chopping. Now in a properly played golf swing both wrists are practically in this position at the top of the swing. It is here that the left really does make itself felt, but it must be remembered that the right also is in position and doing its work, and that it is always in normal men the stronger. This is where the real wrist power comes into the drive at golf.

I have tried both hands separately in the position used in the golfing drive, and find the left comparatively quite ineffective. I had my results verified by George Duncan, the famous young Hanger Hill professional, who found that he could not get anything like a drive with his left by itself, but that with his right only he could drive nearly as far as with both hands.

These results have given the fetish of the left a woeful shake, but in many places it is still blindly worshipped by confirmed slicers, who have no suspicion of their one-eyed idol.

Perhaps one of the most blindly followed axioms of the game is slow-back. Thousands who have no idea why they should go "slow-back" do it funereally, which, of course, although they do not know it, is very wrong. I believe "slow-back" ruins more drives than it makes, for it is always so ridiculously exaggerated. Certainly one of the greatest tragedies—or comedies—of golf is to see five feet two of fourteen stone five that has modeled its swing on Vardon undoing itself with the speed of an oyster opening his back door to see if the sun is up. One must not swing back fast enough to waste power and produce unsteadiness in the recovery at the top of the swing. "That is all there is to it," as the American would put it, but it has ruined millions of drives.

How frequently one sees the player instructed not only to keep his eye on the ball, but to study the turf after it has gone. Now, part of the pleasure—in fact, much the greater part of it—in a well-played drive consists in watching the ball. The turf really is quite monotonous by comparison. The only excuse for this advice is that those who lay it down never expect it to be carried out. It is a case of the greater including the less. It may lead to one's keeping one's eye on the ball. If it does, it has done well. I have, however, seen players strong-minded enough to let the ball go, and then go on with their turf study. The inevitable result is a spoiled drive, for a rigid head and neck will kill any follow-through.

In no way, perhaps, has the want of thought in golf been so conspicuously shown as in regard to the golf-ball, the little, pimply, globular tyrant of scores of thousands of those who might be his master had they loved him more and understood him better, for verily he is a tricky little tyrant. He is a restless little monster, too. Try to make him rest in the place where you put him on a billiard-table. He will never do it, for he stands not on one pimple, but on three or four, and he is ever seeking his three-legged stool. This is not such a great handicap to the poor putter while there is some force behind his putt. It is when the last foot or two of fifteen feet come to be undertaken that "Weary Willie" thinks of his stool, and the unthinking golfer curses the green.

Few golfers know what a handicap they are suffering from in both driving and putting with the pimply ball. Following

some papers of mine on the subject, Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey, the famous wild-fowler and author of *The Projectile-throwing Engines of the Ancients*, conducted a series of most exhaustive experiments with his remarkable catapults which, in the face of the assertions of the trade, conclusively proved that the modern golf-ball is most untruly and unscientifically made. Sir Ralph's articles occupied three columns of *The Times*, and amongst other things he showed clearly that the center of gravity of nearly every ball tried by him was wrong. It followed that in many cases, apart from the pimples, the balls had a strong bias. Indeed, in rolling from a leaden trough down the middle of a billiard-table many of them tried to get into the top pockets. I have had the same experience myself. Sir Ralph's experiments were most interesting and thorough, and they proved to demonstration that the present golf-ball is too rough both in flight and on the green, but I am not aware that either the trade or golfers have shown any marked inclination to avail themselves of the results obtained by him.

Perhaps one of the most wonderful instances of the golfer's want of insight into the beauty of golf is the controversy that is going on in the golfing world as to how the pull is obtained. Now, Harry Vardon has called the pull one of the master-strokes of the game, and in his book, *The Complete Golfer*, he has told us how to play it, and many other books have told us how to play it, and practically all of them ignore the one thing of outstanding importance—the *upward, outward glancing* blow—and tell one carefully about some mysterious turnover of the right forearm, or, as they call it, wrist, whereas in truth this has nothing to do with the stroke except as part of the natural follow-through of a well-played pull; and in time to come golfers will know and understand this.

The reason that they do not know it now, and do not understand golf better, is all part of the tragedy of golf. They have never made any sacrifice for the game. It has been self first and the game after. If a man loved a woman that way, would he know her? I trow not. So it is with thousands of golfers. They have only the husk of the game; and the worst of it is that they, in many cases, are dead to the rest, to the real beauty, of the game. This is no small measure of the great tragedy of golf.

I was talking to such an one the other day. He said:

"I am sure I cannot tell how or why I play a particular stroke. I have played them that way since I can remember. I can't be bothered with theory." Yet that same man the day after, before playing a little chip shot out of a bunker, took his handkerchief out of his pocket and flew it to see which way the wind was blowing. He couldn't "be bothered with theory." If he had had the right kind of theory, which is the concentrated essence of the practice of experts, he would have known that any wind that required such detection could not affect such a short low shot, and instead of sometimes getting into the last eight in the championship he might ere this have won it.

He is one of the tragedies of golf—a fair example: an athlete, a cultured man, a golfer from his nursery, and to-day with far less idea as to the meaning of the soul of golf than he has about his own soul.

It may seem to many that I have herein spoken harshly of golfers. I would not have it so thought if I could avoid it. I love the game, and I have had much pleasure from it in many climes, for the brethren of that grand masonic symbol, the club, have been good friends to me the world over, and in England I have had nothing but kindness and the best of good-fellowship, and a most sportsman-like recognition of what little I have tried to do to spread a knowledge of the game; but even all that cannot prevent me from seeing the canker at the heart of golf, a canker that is sure to be serious if it is not recognized soon, a canker that in any case will be very hard to deal with, but one which may in some way be attended to when once attention has been strongly drawn to it.

Golf is too great a game for those who really love it to stand quietly by and see it develop largely into a social cult or a business affair. Such a development would surely in time work harm to the game.

I was recently waiting at the first tee on the course of a club that shall be nameless. The pair in front of us had come down in a great motor with a famous little actress. They had everything on that any self-respecting golfer would dare—and some extras, and they were out to show her "goff as she is played, don't you know."

Between them they sliced four balls out of bounds into a belt of trees, at almost exactly the same spot, while the little actress smiled. Then they took their cleeks, scraped

their balls about thirty yards off the tee, and "set about" the unfortunate county.

This is not an effort of my imagination. If it were, I should have varied it more. I could not have imagined anything so ridiculously unlikely as four balls, one after the other, going into the same place with almost mechanical precision.

This is what the social side of golf frequently produces.

I have never had any reason to complain of my work not being taken seriously enough. Indeed, I have on occasion had to reprimand, gently of course, over-earnest golfers who insisted on making the pull or the slice into a question of life or death, and even in writing of the tragedy of golf I do not want to do it with lugubrious thought or expression, for I long since discovered that in this country the heavier one gets the less weight one carries; but I do want in all earnestness to direct the attention of golfers to that which is without doubt the tragedy of the game, and that is, on the one hand, the want of that close and intimate knowledge, that true love and sympathy, that can alone make the real golfer, the sincere devotee of a grand game, and, on the other hand, the blind, selfish following of a noble game by hordes who owe, and are content to owe, a duty to the greatest country on earth, a duty they realize as little as they do the beauty of that which they insult by calling it their game, even while they will not know it.

Many times I have been asked why I write so much about games and play so little. I have never explained why, but the simple reason is that there are many to play and few to work. Now for a time I must work. From a long acquaintance with sport in all parts of the world I have learned more than is known in England, and I have indelibly set my name on the scroll of lawn-tennis, cricket, and golf, not because I wanted to do that, for then, probably, I should not have done it, but because I knew them better and loved them more than others, *and wished the others to share my enjoyment*. That is the great secret—of many things.

The fact is that not only amongst golfers, but amongst England's men generally, there is a deadness of national spirit, a want of imagination, a dulness, an absence of the poetry of life that should pulse in every fiber of the men who are born in a country like England, with associations and traditions such as England's. It is by violence, and

by violence alone, that they will be brought to see this, and the mildest, most harmless part of the violence they will have to suffer before we see again the rugged spirit that once was in England's sons will be the literary violence of such as I, which springs from a love of England passing the love of Englishmen, for I know her as they do not, and how worthy she is to be loved and worked for—and fought for.

In the days to come perhaps our golfers will realize that some little of their time and thought is due to England. Many of them now serve their country truly and well. Multitudes of them not at all. It is of these I think mostly when I write of the tragedy of golf. I cannot think even of these as wilfully unpatriotic, and I hope that their eyes may be opened to the possibilities before them, and that in a short time I may write of the Golfers' Imperial League instead of "The Tragedy of Golf."

P. A. VAILE.